

# PUBLIC HEALTH FACT SHEET

## Cholera

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### What is cholera?

Cholera is a diarrheal disease caused by the bacteria (germ) *Vibrio cholera*. Cholera is rare in the United States and is more common in areas that have poor water treatment and hygiene practices.

### How is cholera spread?

Cholera is spread by eating food or drinking water that is contaminated with the bacteria. People traveling to foreign countries with areas of poor hygiene and insufficient water treatment may be at a greater risk. Cholera can also be spread by eating contaminated shellfish such as oysters and clams. Shellfish become infected by coming into contact with contaminated sewage.

### Can cholera be used for bioterrorism?

Yes. Bioterrorism is the use of any biological organism to hurt people or create fear. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention lists cholera as a possible bioterrorist agent; however, it has never been successfully used in this manner.

### What are the symptoms and how soon after exposure do symptoms appear?

A person with cholera may have mild to severe diarrhea, vomiting and dehydration (loss of water from the body). Fever is usually absent. Some people develop profuse (a lot of) watery diarrhea, nausea, vomiting, and leg cramps, and if they do not receive treatment quickly enough they can die from dehydration, shock, or kidney failure. The symptoms appear from a few hours to five days after exposure to the germ.

### How is cholera diagnosed?

The diagnosis of cholera is made by finding the bacteria in a stool sample that is sent to a laboratory.

### How is cholera treated?

Immediate replacement of the water lost through diarrhea is the best treatment for cholera. If this does not take place a person may go into shock and could die from the loss of fluids. Antibiotics can be used to shorten the length of the disease.

### Is there a vaccine for the cholera?

There is no vaccine against cholera that is currently available.

### How can cholera be prevented?

There are several steps that you can take to reduce your chance of being exposed to cholera (also read recommendations in the next question if you will be traveling outside the United States):

- Always wash your hands thoroughly with soap and water after going to the bathroom, after changing diapers, before preparing meals, and before eating.
- Be certain that bodily wastes are properly discarded, and make sure to properly wash or dispose of soiled diapers.

- Avoid drinking untreated water.
- Avoid eating raw or undercooked fish and shellfish.

## **If I am traveling outside of the United States, should I be concerned about cholera?**

In general, your risk of getting sick when traveling depends on the area you visit. Travelers in less economically developed countries are at greater risk than those traveling in developed areas. In most developed countries, such as Canada, Japan, Australia, New Zealand, and most of the European nations, the risk to your health is about the same as that in the United States. In Africa, South and Central America, and the Middle and Far East, sanitation and hygiene vary considerably, and the risk for cholera may be higher. Avoid traveling to areas with known outbreaks of cholera.

In addition to the steps listed in the question above, travelers should practice the following recommendations:

- “Boil it, cook it, peel it, or forget it.” Eat foods that have been thoroughly cooked and are still hot and steaming. Avoid raw vegetables and fruits that cannot be peeled or washed. Vegetables like lettuce are easily contaminated and are very hard to thoroughly wash.
- Avoid foods and beverages from street vendors.
- Drink only bottled water and carbonated beverages, keeping in mind that bottled carbonated water is safer than uncarbonated water.
- Ask for drinks without ice unless the ice is made from bottled or boiled water.
- Avoid popsicles and flavored ices that may have been made with contaminated water.
- For more information regarding international travel and cholera, contact the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Travelers Health Office at (877) 394-8747 or through the internet at <http://www.cdc.gov/travel>.

## **Are there any restrictions for people with cholera?**

Yes. Because cholera is a disease that can easily spread to other people, health care providers are required by law to report cases of cholera to the local board of health. In order to protect the public, workers at food-related businesses who have cholera must stay out of work until they have recovered from their illness and can no longer spread the disease to others. Food-related businesses include restaurants, sandwich shops, hospital kitchens, supermarkets, and dairy or food-processing plants. This regulation also includes workers in schools, residential programs, daycare and health care facilities who feed, give mouth care or dispense medications to clients.

## **Where can I get more information?**

- Your doctor, nurse or clinic
- The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) website at: <http://www.bt.cdc.gov/>
- Your local board of health (listed in the telephone directory under “government”)
- The Massachusetts Department of Public Health (MDPH), Division of Epidemiology and Immunization at (617) 983-6800 or toll-free at (888) 658-2850 or on the MDPH website at <http://www.mass.gov/dph>